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September 1, 2006, 9:05 am

Another Kick in the Teeth for Wikipedia

By [STEPHEN J. DUBNER](#)

For the record, I like [Wikipedia](#) just fine, as long as people understand what it is and what it isn't. What it is: a useful and engaging enterprise in user-generated content about a mind-blowingly diverse range of subjects. What it isn't: a dependable substitute for a reference work, at least not in many cases. We have touched on this dichotomy [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#).

The argument in defense of Wikipedia that I find most troubling is that it is self-correcting and self-policing, which is to say that, *Hey, in the end all the mistakes and vendettas get fixed by caring and level-headed people*. The problem, of course, is that if someone happens to read or cite a Wikipedia entry at a moment when all those things *haven't* been fixed, which is obviously a vast, vast, vast majority of the time, then the mistakes get promulgated as fact.

So I was surprised to read in the 9/4/06 issue of [Business Week](#) that [the U.S. Patent & Trademark office](#) had been using Wikipedia as a source to help determine the validity of patent applications. According to the *BW* article, "Wikipedia has been cited in patent decisions on everything from car parts to chip designs."

But as of August 15, the patent office pulled the plug on Wikipedia. "We've taken Wikipedia off our list of accepted sources of information," said Patents Commissioner John Doll. The article also quotes [Greg Aharonian](#), who publishes a patent newsletter and is a longtime critic of the patent office: "I've been complaining about this for years. From a legal point of view, a Wiki citation is toilet paper."

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| 1. September 1st, 2006 9:42 am | Holy crap. I can't believe the USPTO would use Wikipedia as a cited source! This just boggles my mind. I would like to think that most people understand the use of the Wikipedia like you do, but unfortunately many do not. — Posted by fallenposters |
| 2. September 1st, 2006 10:12 am | "Hey, in the end all the mistakes and vendettas get fixed by caring and level-headed people" Heh heh. Substitute "caring and level-headed people" with "the market." — Posted by Derek Scruggs |
| 3. September 1st, 2006 10:48 am | Perhaps if each Wiki contributor could build up a reputation for veracity and accuracy? Contributors could still remain anonymous. The more reputable the individual, the more they value their |

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